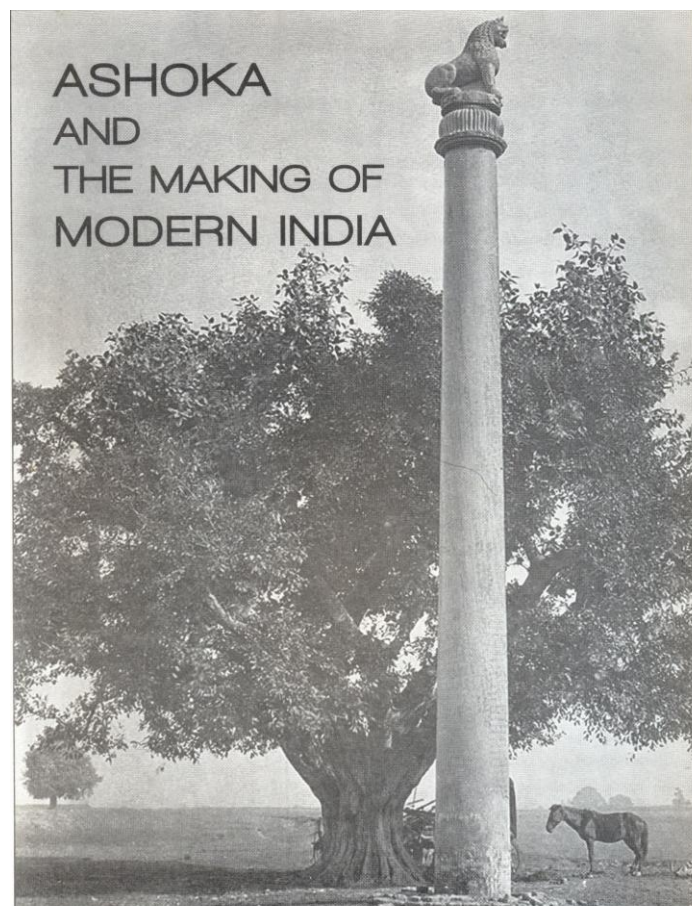

Antiquarian Interests in Medieval India: The Relocation of Ashokan Pillars by Firuzshah Tughluq

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ANTIQUARIAN INTERESTS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA: THE RELOCATION OF ASHOKAN PILLARS BY FIRUZSHAH TUGHLUQ*

Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi

The Ashokan Pillars known for their highly polished circular shafts, inscriptions and exquisitely carved capitals have since long drawn much attention from both scholars and casual visitors. Much work has been done on their sources of inspiration, design and carvings.¹ Similarly a great deal of attention has also been devoted to the study of the inscriptions carved on their shafts.² There has been much speculations also on the purpose and origins of the pillar cults in ancient India.³ However, themes like the technology involved in erecting them or transporting them from the quarry to the site of their location; their re-use and relocation during the subsequent periods appear to have escaped serious enquiry.

Numbering around twenty-five, and scattered almost throughout north India (see Map), these 'Ashokan' pillars are monoliths, tall and tapering, finished with a very fine polish impossible now to duplicate. Each of these pillars in their original state was surmounted with a fine polished capital carved out of a separate block of stone in the form of an inverted bell motif topped with a platform carved with animal motifs crowned with a figure of an animal like a lion or a bull. Ten of these pillars bear the Ashokan edicts while the others are un-inscribed and devoid of any text.

Not all these pillars, either bearing the Ashokan edict or not, however appear to have their origin in the Mauryan period: some of them were pre-Mauryan having been re-used by Asoka who had them inscribed with copies of his edicts.⁴ According to the Minor Rock Edict I, belonging probably to the 11th RY of Ashoka, and put up at Rupnath and Sahsaram, Ashoka ordered that "wherever there were stone pillars (*sila thambha*) (available)" the edict was to be inscribed over them. Similarly in line 32 of the Pillar Edict VII issued in the 27th RY, it was again asserted that in order that his message should endure:

"Devanampiya declares: This *dhamma*-edict shall be engraved wherever there is a stone pillar or a stone slab, so that it may long endure".⁵

There are at least two pillars which appear to be a result of a compliance with these orders of Ashoka: according to Irwin the Allahabad pillar is

such a pre-Ashokan pillar used by Ashoka.⁶ The other is the Delhi-Topra pillar (the pillar at Firuzshah Kotla, New Delhi), where the edicts were engraved when it was standing erect: the inscriptions are cut on all sides of the shaft, while the two lower lines of the Pillar Edict VII run all around it.⁷

These pillars, roughly 30 to 50 tons in weight and quite long, measuring anywhere between 10 m to 13.75 m⁸ are generally made of buff-grey, fine, hard grained sandstone quarried from Chunar area besides river Ganges near Varanasi. The Delhi-Topra pillar, however is made of the pinkish sandstone generally found in the Mathura region.

A number of these pillars were relocated and re-used during the medieval period. We have the testimony of Firishta that Firuzshah Tughluq (r.1351-88) had erected ten 'ancient pillars' during his reign.⁹ Out of these, at least four (all Ashokan) are known to be still extant: two in Delhi and the other two in the present state of Haryana. At Delhi one pillar is said to have been brought from Topra (a village in modern Haryana) and fixed on top of a structure especially built for the purpose near his royal palace at Kotla Firuzshah. The other was transported from Mirath (modern Meerut) and fixed near a hunting palace, again within the vicinity of his capital city, the Firuzabad. The other two, the pillars at Fatehabad and Hissar (both in Haryana) appear to be fragments of a single pillar of Ashokan origin.¹⁰

The practice of re-using and re-erecting these pillars continued during the Mughal rule as well: Thus we have the Allahabad pillar fixed or re-fixed by Jahangir (r.1605-27) in the fort of Allahabad. A beautiful Persian inscription proclaiming '*Muhiuddin Muhammad Aurangzeb Padshah Ghazi, san 1071* (year AD 1660-61)' is affixed on the shaft of the Lauriya Nandangarh Pillar of Ashoka.¹¹

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The first question which concerns us in this paper is the problem of how these massive pillars were cut and transported from the place of origin (mainly from quarries of Chunar and Mathura) by Ashoka, their transportation to their new sites and installation therein. The sheer weight and volume of the monoliths would require much labour and use of technological devices.

Some light on this issue is thrown by two 14th century contemporary sources of Firuzshah Tughluq: the anonymous *Sirat-i Firuzshahi* and the *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi* of Shams Siraj Afif.¹² From both these texts it appears that Firuzshah in September 1367 ordered the use of capstan, pulleys, ropes and padding to remove and refix the pillars and large carts and boats to transfer them by road and river. To quote Afif on the

pillar being taken down and prepared for the journey from Topra to Delhi:

...He (Firuz Shah) collected people from the villages and towns situated in the neighbourhood of the pillar, as also from the *doab* and non-*doab* regions. Foot soldiers and horsemen were also summoned for help. A variety of tools and implements and other provisions were brought. The cotton morsels (*nawāl ha-i mahluj*) of the trees were used for packing and uprooting. The silken ropes from the *sembal* tree were collected for holding the pillar during the digging to save it from any bending. Cotton supports (*takiagāh-i minara*) were utilized to hold up the pillar lest it should fall flat on the ground and break into pieces. During the digging, the base of the pillar rested on cotton columns (*nawālha-i manka*), which were gradually removed one by one. While digging, it was discovered that the pillar was having a rectangular base of one piece stone. The rectangular stone base was also dug out. The whole structure was wrapped in soft bark (*post-i khām*) of the trees, from top to bottom, to avoid any damage, due to Divine mercy and Firuzshah's good fortune.¹³

Afif then goes on to explain how the pillar after it was removed from its ancient moorings was transported to Delhi:

A transport-cart (*gardun*) comprising forty-two wheels was (especially) prepared. Ropes (*tanāb*) were tied to these wheels so that the cart (with its load) could be driven with all the wheels together. Several thousand labourers were put on work to load the pillar on the cart. Each rope weighing ten maunds was pulled by two hundred men at a time. All the forty-two wheels were thus pulled with ropes with the help of thousands of labourers.¹⁴

From this account of Afif it appears that in order to uproot the pillar, ropes were used and *sembal* silk¹⁵ and cotton bale packing were applied around the pillar to protect it from any violent impact. Once the pillar had been safely removed, it was laden on a large cart with forty two wheels which were then simultaneously pulled by using human labour. But how exactly the job of uprooting, loading and ultimately moving the cart was accomplished, is left un-explained. The 'variety of tools and implements' (as mentioned by Afif in the above quote) which were used to accomplish these jobs are not elaborated upon or even mentioned.

The technical details of uprooting (*furūd āwurdan*) and transportation (*rawān kardan*) of the pillar however have been mentioned by the anonymous author of *Sīrat -i Fīrūzshāhi*. It appears from his text that unlike Shams Siraj Afif, the author had access to the state records and official documents. He mentions the packing of the pillar, the use of ropes and masonry and wooden piers used to balance

the pillar during its removal and the use of pulleys (*gardūn* or *gardāngah*, lit. circular discs or wheels) and capstan (*charkh*) to accomplish the whole task. The entire technical process was tried to be explained not only through a written account, but also through a series of illustrations (*misāl*) which go a long way to help us understand the process.¹⁶

Thus explaining the plan of the first job, that is, the uprooting of the pillar, we are informed that a wooden frame having five pulleys and five capstans was first constructed (see Illustration I):

Construct six piers (*pāya-i chob*) like unto the piers of a dome, each ten yards (*gaz*) in circumference and of the same height as the pillar (*sang*) itself. Two of these piers should be constructed behind (*aqab*) the pillar and two each on the left (and the right). The distance between each pier should be 6 yards and 7 yards from the stone pillar. The piers should be strengthened with iron nails (*mismār-i āhan*) and wrapped in raw hides and ropes (*charm-i khām wa tanāb*). Each pier should be further re-strengthened by fixing two thick and long slanting wooden planks on each of their three sides thus giving them support all directions. These (strengthened) wooden piers should then be joined (*wasl*) to each other at two places, in the middle and top, by means of (two) strong wooden logs and beams (*chob ha-i muhkam wa shahtīr*). On each of the beam, pulleys (*gardāng*) should be fixed in such a way that ropes may pass over them in a vertical position. Such pulleys should be fixed at five places, two (each) on either side of the stone (pillar) and one at its back. For holding (*bastan*, i.e., tightening) and pulling (*gardanidan*, i.e., moving) these ropes, five capstans (*charkh*) should be set up. Towards the (sixth) capstan at the back should be the '*aqabān* (the end pier) with a similar (as mentioned above) capstan with necessary ropes tied to it. The ends of these six ropes (of the capstans) should be tightly bound round the stone pillar so that its upper portion be firmly held by them. And in front of the pillar the two piers should be tied thick and strong ropes at twenty places end to end in such a way that there is a space of a yard in between each of them. This is so that when the top of the pillar is lowered, it may rest (*takia*) on these ropes. And four long ropes be tied to the top of the stone pillar (*sar-i sang*) which may be pulled towards the front when it is desired to incline the pillar from its upright position. And the same time (of doing so) the ropes of the capstans be loosened and relaxed yard by yard until the pillar rests on the ropes tied in the front. After that the ropes be pulled and capstans relaxed accordingly bit by bit so that the top of the pillar slowly comes to rest on the ramp (*pāsheb*) built (in the front). This ramp should be constructed at a distance of 6 yards from the base of the pillar. Towards the pillar it should be 5 yards in height and on the other side (back) it should be 16 yards. Its breadth should

be 10 yards and length 15 yards. This ramp should be made of mud covered and strengthened from all four sides with wooden (planks).¹⁷

The capstans and pulleys are again mentioned when the pillar was to be balanced on the cart, loaded or unloaded on the boats which navigated it through the Jamuna from Topra to its destination in Delhi and then again when it was raised stage by stage on top of the third storey of a structure built specifically to raise it.¹⁸

The account goes on to describe the loading of the pillar on the boat:

At the place where the boat (*kashti*) shall be tied, the ground should be dug as much as necessary, so that it may become just right (for the job). The wheels of the cart (*larha*) towards the boat may then be removed so that on this side the cart may come to rest on the ground. Four capstans should then be erected in a line behind the pillar at a distance of 10 yards and two capstans at the same distance at each end of the pillar. To these capstans strong ropes should be tied and a ramp of thick wooden beams should be constructed from the pillar right down to the middle of the boat where the pillar will (ultimately) rest. Then the ropes of the four capstans opposite the pillar as well as four the ropes which will be held by a multitude of men be relaxed yard by yard but all the time held firmly so as to move one end of the pillar exactly as much as the other. In this way it should be moved until the pillar comes to rest exactly in the middle of the boat.¹⁹

When the pillar reached its destination and it was to be raised on top of the building designed to hold it, the capstans were again brought into use. This building, constructed in the form of a pyramid had three storeys each of which was provided with vaulted chambers. The core of this pyramidal structure is solid. The corner chambers on each floor (which are now more) had stairs within. To raise the pillar on the top of this building help was taken of a wooden ramp and a pair of capstans. When the pillar was raised up to the level of the first floor a unique method was applied to raise it further. Leaving a space of 'about the circumference of the pillar' the building was raised to a height of 2 yards from all around. The pillar was then raised to that level with the aide of capstans and the space below was then filled up. It was in this manner that stage by stage the pillar and the builing was raised to the level of the third storey.²⁰

From the above description and the appended diagrams of the devices used to carry this pillar and refixing it at the Kotla in Firuzabad (Delhi), it appears that each capstan had four arms by which it was rotated to draw the rope looped round the pillar. The same sources also inform us that the same technique and devices were employed by the engineers of Firuz Shah to relocate the Meerut pillar, which, as Afif

remarked, was smaller than the pillar transported to Kotla Firuzshah.²¹ It is however quite remarkable that no other source of the medieval period mentions the capstan (*charkh*). The pulley too is conspicuous by its absence in Mughal miniatures depicting building construction. However we do hear of a device, *jarr-i saqīl*, which was used for dragging, hoisting or hauling heavy objects.²² Was it just a general term for a device or technique used in lifting heavy objects? Or was it the capstan which was being referred to? In the miniatures which survive from the Mughal period where building construction scenes are depicted, the only device to lift heavy loads depicted is the wooden ramps – the *pāsheb* of the *Sirat-i Firuzshahi*.²³ When Jahangir ordered the re-erection of the Ashokan Pillar at the Allahabad fort and had his inscription put over it, his engineers would have certainly used a device other than a ramp to erect a 40-50 ton and 10.7 m long structure. Was it that the capstan was miraculously discovered by Firuz Shah Tughluq in 1367 AD and its memory faded soon after? Or is it that it was a labour saving device which was known since long but was ignored by the court chroniclers in their accounts and narratives. The capstans had been used in the operation of military devices known as *manjaniq* (mangonel or trebuchet). These machines were first used by the Chinese in 5th–6th century. The first image of such a machine originates from a wall painting in the Pendzhikent palace in Central Asia near Samarkand and dates back to the end of the 7th or the beginning of the 8th century. It depicts a human-operated machine employing a sling.²⁴ The most important surviving technical treatise on these machines is *Kitab aniq fi al-manajaniq* (An Elegant Book on Trebuchets), written in 1462 C.E. by Yusuf ibn Urunbugha al-Zaradkash. One of the most profusely illustrated Arabic manuscripts ever produced, it provides detailed construction and operating information. These writings are particularly significant because they offer a unique insight into the applied mechanics of pre-modern societies.²⁵ This mechanical device consisted of a wooden beam pivoted on a wooden stand. The short arm of the beam had a counterweight put on it, while the long arm had a sling suspended at its far end which carried the missile or projectile which was usually in the form of a large piece of stone. In the hands of the Mongols a winch or a capstan had been added to it which made it possible for a lesser number of men to pull down the long arm (See Illustration). Probably this was the type of machine which was used in the battle of Sind during the thirteenth century.²⁶ In the fourteenth century, the Delhi Sultans' armies had different kinds of mangonels, called *manjaniq*, *maghrabi* and *'arrada*. A chance drawing by Thomas Bowrey and a description of the hauling of a ship during repairs in 1679 at Narsapur in coastal Andhra also brings to light the use of a

'crab', which was a form of capstan and tackles which are used to concentrate hauling power by slowing down the movement.²⁷ This device has also not been mentioned by any of the contemporary indigenous (Mughal) sources.

Let us now go back in time and enquire into the type of knowledge known or not known in ancient India, especially during and since the period of Ashoka. How did his masons lift these pillars and fixed them in an upright position at various locations?

An initial attempt at answering this question was made by P.C. Pant and Vidula Jayaswal when in 1990 they carried out explorations of ancient stone quarries in the Chunar region.²⁸ The antiquity of these quarries, according to the two archaeologists, was established by the presence of epigraphs on some dressed stones which were written in the Kharoshthi script of the Mauryan times.²⁹ According to this survey, blocks after being extracted from the live rocks were chiselled into cylindrical forms which were then rolled down the hills or brought down by floating them through the seasonal stream-beds. They were then loaded on rafts or large boats and carried through the Ganges to their destinations like Sanchi. To quote:

....the first part of the journey of the extracted blocks was performed by rolling the blocks down the hills. The gentle slopes and even the *nāla* [drain] channels were used for the purpose. This mode was followed till the blocks reached the main course of the [river] Ganga. After reaching the course of this mighty river, down stream transportation of these blocks was performed, perhaps, with the help of the wooden rafts.³⁰

It is however interesting to note that although the stone blocks found in these quarries were cut in cylindrical forms like the Ashokan pillar-shafts, none of them was larger than 3 metres. The Ashokan pillars, as we have seen, were at least three times longer. To roll down a stone block of over 10 or 13 metres in length and about 20 – 50 tons in weight would have been a difficult task indeed. To roll down such massive stone shafts would have definitely led to damaging them. Probably the Ashokan and Mauryan architects, like the Firuzian architects took the help of an instrument like a capstan or a windlass. They could have very well learnt of these from the reports of Alexander's ballistic machines, or from their encounters with such Greek and Macedonian officials as took service with the Mauryas.³¹ Such acceptance of Greek knowledge and technology during the Mauryan period is an accepted assumption, and is reflected in the making of the Ashokan Pillars themselves. The lion-capital of Ashoka with its realism is a typical example of Mauryan borrowings of Greek traditions of sculpture. Alexander had entered the region of Afghanistan

around 331 BC and then proceeded to conquer the regions of North India where as a result Greek settlements had resulted therein. Thus when Ashoka set up his Kandahar inscription, it was in Aramaic, the official language of the Greeks and the Achaemenids. The Rock Edict XIII makes a mention of the 'Yonas' or *Yavanas* who were settled in the Mauryan territory.

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The second question which concerns us is that why did the rulers of the medieval period re-locate and re-erect these pillars? Firuzshah was not the first or the last medieval ruler who 're-used' these ancient edifices. A pillar of ancient origins is fixed in the middle of the courtyard of Qutbuddin Aibek's (r.1206-1210) *Qubbat ul Islam* Mosque. Which of its two builders – Qutbuddin Aibek or Iltutmish (r.1211-36) – was responsible for fixing this 'Iron Pillar' is not known.³² During the seventeenth century the practice of re-using these pillars continued as in 1605 we find that Jahangir not only re-inscribed an Ashokan pillar which was lying at the site of Akbar's fort in Allahabad but also had it re-erected within the fort.³³ Then in 1660-61 Mughal officials had the name of Aurangzeb (r.1656-1707), the last of the Great Mughals, inscribed on the Lauriya Nandangarh pillar, the only Ashokan pillar which till date has its capital (a seated lion) intact.³⁴

Was it that rulers like Firuzshah Tughluq, Jahangir, and Aurangzeb were aware of the existence and grandeur of Ashoka? Were these pillars a trophy for the 'Muslim' rulers who allegedly just believed in looting, spoliation and desecration of anything which was pre-Islamic in origin? It has been usually asserted that the appropriation and re-erection of the pillars was by and large an act which reflected the "trophy value and consequent ability to memorialise the triumph of the 'Muslim' present over the 'Hindu' past". Such re-use has also been depicted as "a symbol of the domination of Islam" and a derogation of the pre-Islamic past.³⁵ Or was this act of re-location and re-use a tool to legitimise their rule? Else, was it just pure and simply commemorative in nature?³⁶

As far as the "first" such case is concerned, that is the Iron Pillar at the *Qubbat ul Islam* Mosque, we have almost no evidence that it was erected by Iltutmish. So there is no case of communal appropriation by him of the same "in part to glorify the achievements of past civilizations and affirm the ideological beginnings of Islamic rule in India by aligning himself with pre-Islamic sovereigns".³⁷ At least the contemporaries or the near contemporaries never thought these acts as affirmations of Muslim rule in India. During the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325-51), Ibn Batuta, the Moroccan traveller to India

simply mentions this pillar as 'awe-inspiring'.³⁸ He makes no mention of its provenance or antiquity. Nor did he take notice of an inscription on it. Francois Bernier, the French traveller and 'physician-scientist' who initially served under Dara Shukoh before joining the camp of Aurangzeb, also mentions this edifice without adding any communal meaning to it:

Two leagues from the city, on the Agra road, in a place which the Mahometans call *Koia Kotub-eddine* (Khawaja Qutb uddin or *Koh-i Quth uddin*), is a very old edifice, formerly a *Deūra*, or Temple of idols, containing inscriptions written in characters different from those of any language spoken in the *Indies*, and so ancient that no one understands them.³⁹

It is also interesting to note that the great iconoclast Aurangzeb's officials while putting his name on the Lauriya Nandangarh pillar did not order the dismantling of the capital which adorned its top. It is obvious that these pillars were edifices whose provenance was generally unknown and they were acting as palimpsests for the new rulers. Jahangir too used the pillar at Allahabad fort, where he had stationed himself at the time of his rebellion against his father, to put up his imperial genealogy. Were these then attempts, as Catherine Asher argues, to link their respective rules to 'both the Timurid tradition and to deeply rooted Indian traditions'?⁴⁰

What was Sultan Firuzshah's purpose in relocating these pillars? As we have noted above, he was the only medieval ruler to have re-used around ten ancient pillars of which at least two were inscribed Ashokan pillars.

It is important to note that our main contemporary source of the Tughluq period which supplies us with all the technical detail on the subject – the *Sīrat-i Firūzshahi* – uses three distinct terms – *sutūn* (pillar), *'imād* (column) and *mīnār* (minaret) – while narrating the story of the transfer of the Topra and Meerut pillars of Ashoka to Delhi. The terms *sang* (monolith, lit. stone), and *sang-i sutūn* (the stone of the pillar) are also employed.

Pillars, as we know, had no special significance in Islam and thus had never been used as free-standing monuments in the Islamic world. Monumental pillars had been erected in Iran under the Achaeminids but since its conquest by the Muslims, their use had been totally abandoned. On the other hand, the use of the *mīnār* was not only known but sanctified as well. It was from 8th century AD that the *mīnār* emerged as a component of mosque architecture. The Iranian mosques, as they developed from 8th century onwards, were based on a plan which rotated around a centrally located courtyard with the main prayer chamber on

the west (the '*Qibla*' or the direction of the Ka'aba from India) and cloistered and colonnaded porticoes and pavilions (the *riwāq*) lining the other three sides which in their centre were pierced with entrance portals (the *aiwān*). Outside this structure, and independent of it, was constructed a large tower or *mīnār* primarily used by the *muezzin* (a person calling the prayer; the hailer) who would climb it to be heard far and wide. These towers or minarets near the mosque were known as *maizana* or minarets for call for prayer. Being associated with prayers, thus, these structures were treated as sacred. A typical example of such a *mīnār* in India, and the only such surviving example, is the Qutb Minar situated near the *Qubbat ul Islam* mosque of Aibek. It is also important to note that there is no other such example in India. It is also pertinent to note that within a few years of the building of the Delhi mosque, another important Jami' Masjid was constructed at Ajmer, known as *Arhāi din ka Jhonpra*. It was constructed by Sultan Iltutmish, who had also considerably expanded the *Qubbat ul Islam* Mosque. At Ajmer, the minarets did make an appearance but in the form of attached show-pieces on the sides of the main central arch of the prayer chamber. Thus within a couple of years of the building of the Qutb, the *mīnār* had been reduced to a votive symbol. An attempt at reviving the *mīnār* was made during the reign of Alauddin Khalji (r.1255-1316) when he started the construction of his *Alai Minār* which was never completed. From this time onwards, the *mīnār* as a detached tower or as a part of the main structure is not encountered with until the reign of Shahjahan (r.1627-56), the maker of the Taj and the founder of the Mughal city of Delhi.

It is also significant that even during the reign of Firuzshah Tughluq no minaret was constructed along with the mosque. However, the author of *Sīrat-i Firūzshāhi*, while shedding some light on the purpose of the Sultan to transfer the Topra pillar from its original location to a place near the Jami' Masjid at Firuzabad informs us that the Sultan remarked:

'By the grace of the Creator, who sees and hears everything, we shall remove the lofty and impregnable column ('*imād-i raḥī wa man'ī*) and make a *mīnār* of it in the Jami' Masjid of Firūzābād, where, God willing, it shall stand as long as the world endures.'⁴¹

At another place the same source while mentioning the locational affinity of the pillar with the Jami' Masjid of Firuzabad remarked:

After it had remained an object of worship of the polytheists and infidels (*ma'bad-i mushrikān wa kāfirān*) for so many thousand years, by the grace of God and through the efforts of Sultan Firuzshah, (it) became the *mīnār* of the place of worship for the faithful!

These statements apparently are intended for us to form a view, which Anthony Welch and Howard Crane share, that this act of relocation of

the pillars was to 'serve as visible statement of Muslim convictions' and that these pillars were 'trophies' in the hands of the King of Islam.⁴²

But then as we have already seen, there was no place of a 'sacred *mīnār*' in the building practices of Sultanate India. That these statements were nothing but hyperbole is also demonstrated by the reasons which have been forwarded by Shams Siraj Afif. According to him, one of the primary reasons for the relocation of the pillars was that:

It is a fact that every great king took care during his reign to set up some lasting memorial of his power. Hence Sultan Shams al din Iltutmish raised the large *mīnār* [Qutb Minar] in the Jami' Masjid at old Delhi (*dehli-i kuhna*), the history of which is quite well known. Similarly every other great ruler left behind numerous memorials and examples so that their names may remain in vogue till the Day of Judgement. These two wonderful pillars (i.e. the Topra and the Meerut pillars) re-erected by Firuzshah would remain such a memorial to him that it would not be possible to find another example like it in history.⁴³

Probably it was this reason which had appealed to his successor kings as well. Had it been otherwise, Firuzshah would have consciously made an attempt to erase or deface the earlier writings on them. However no such attempt was made. Even an attempt to carve some holy verses or the sacred sayings of the Prophet were not made by him or any of the other kings.

There is yet another supporting evidence for this argument. It derives from yet another reason mentioned by Afif. It appears that Firuzshah was driven by antiquarian reasons to relocate these pillars. Both Afif and the author of the *Sīrat* categorically inform us that Firuzshah had observed these pillars on previous occasions as well and had also heard the popular legends related to them:

Some of the learned infidels (*kuffār*) on the authority of their *Hindi* books (i.e. old indigenous texts), said that the pillar had grown out of the (bowel of the) earth and reached the heavens, while the others said that underneath the pillar was a magical *talisman* or spell and that nobody could remove the pillar....⁴⁴

Afif further goes on to inform us that after observing the inscriptions on the pillars, the Sultan ordered the learned Brahmins to be brought so that they may decipher what was written therein. The Brahmins naturally had no knowledge of that script (Brahmi) and thus could not read what was written but still went on to explain to the king that these two pillars were the staff (*gada*) of Bhim, one of the Pandavas.⁴⁵

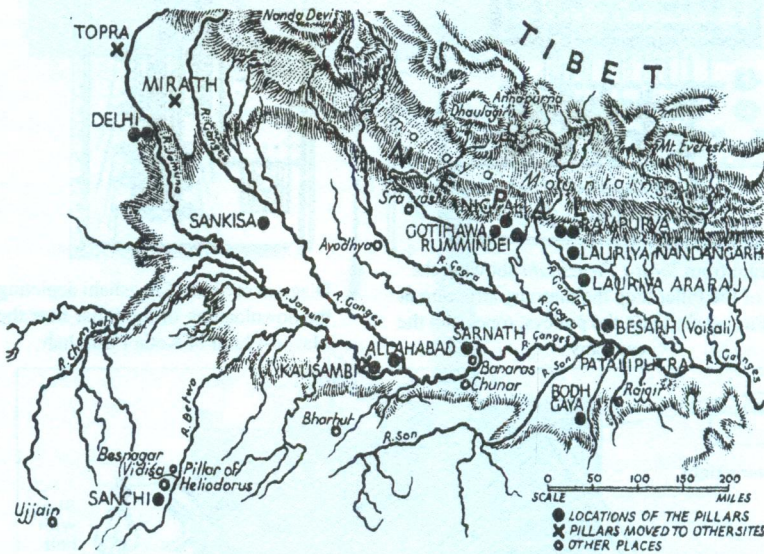
But then according to the author of *Sīrat* some learned men were able to correctly decipher and read a second inscription which was in

Nagari. It was an inscription written in Sanskrit which was inscribed around half a decade or so before Iltutmish ruled over Delhi. It was composed in 1164.⁴⁶ To quote:

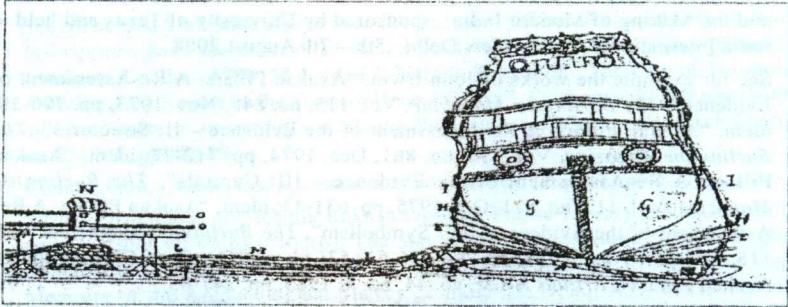
On the pillar is an inscription, the characters of which are unintelligible to the men of this age; but those who have the knowledge of history narrate a tradition to the effect that four thousand odd years have passed since this pillar and a temple were erected at this place (Topra). Another inscription on the pillar is only 249 years old and is said to mention that Bisal Deva [Visal Deva] Chauhan, *rai* of Sambhal, who came to worship certain idols on the banks of the river Saraswati, found this pillar in its present position.⁴⁷

Thus the Sultan was interested to know the antiquity of the pillars, and like a true antiquarian made attempts to decipher the inscriptions which he encountered on these ancient edifices. It is also clear that he was narrated these stories (the story of Bhim and its affiliation with the pillars) and the contents of the inscription only after they had been to his capital.

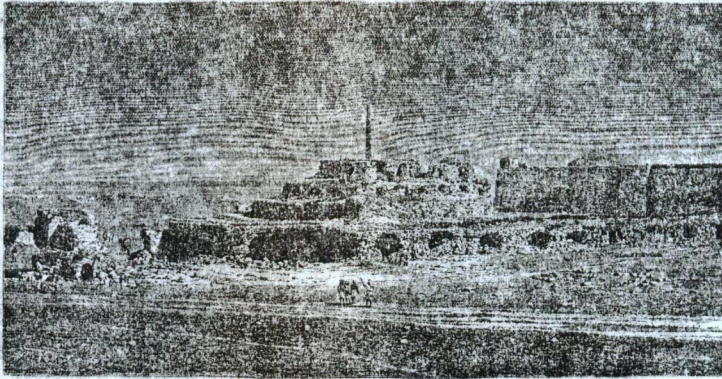
Further proof of his secular intentions is obtained from the fact that he re-named the larger of the two as *minār-i zarrīn* (the 'Golden Pillar') a name which had association with imperial and temporal rather than religious or moral authority. The pillars were re-located as a memorial to his rule rather than as an assertion of his Islamic identity.



Map showing location of 'Aśokan' pillars.



Haulage of Qutbshāhi ship at Narsapur, 1679 (Bowrey).
Note the use of capstan and tackles.



Asokan Pillar at Firuzshah Kotla, New Delhi



Asokan Pillar on the Delhi Ridge near Bara Hindu Rao

- * A draft of the paper was initially presented at the International conference 'Asoka and the Making of Modern India', sponsored by University of Texas and held at India International Centre, New Delhi, 5th – 7th August 2008
1. See for example the works of John Irwin, "Asokan Pillars: A Re-Assessment of Evidence", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 115, no. 848, Nov. 1973, pp. 706-20; idem, "Asokan Pillars: A Re-Assessment of the Evidence – II: Structures", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 116, no. 861, Dec. 1974, pp. 712-27; idem, "Asokan Pillars: A Re-Assessment of the Evidence – III: Capitals", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 117, no. 871, Oct. 1975, pp. 631-43; idem, "Asokan Pillars: A Re-Assessment of the Evidence – IV: Symbolism", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 118, no. 884, Nov. 1976, pp. 734+36-51+53; idem, "The True Chronology of Asokan Pillars", *Artibus Asiae*, vo. 44, no. 4, 1983, pp. 247-65.
 2. E. Hultze, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol I: Inscriptions of Asoka*, (new edition), Varanasi (reprint, 1969; Also see Alexander Cunningham, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. I, Varanasi (reprint) 1961, pp. 34-42; J.F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol III: Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Varanasi, reprint, 1970. The Ashokan inscriptions were however first deciphered and published by James Prinsep. See for example his "A Description, with Drawings of the Ancient Stone Pillar at Allahabad called Bhim Sen's Gada or Club", *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. III, Jan-Dec 1834, Calcutta, 1834, pp.105-25.
 3. See James Prinsep, "Further Elucidation of the lat or Silasthambha inscriptions from various sources", *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. VI, 1837, pp.790-97; John Irwin, "The Ancient Pillar-Cult at Prayag (Allahabad): Its Pre-Asokan Origins", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, London, vol. 2, 1983, pp. 253-80.
 4. See John Irwin, "The Prayag Bull-Pillar: Another pre-Asokan Monument", *South Asian Archaeology 1979*, ed. H. Hartel, West Berlin, 1981, pp.313-40; idem, "The Ancient Pillar-cult at Prayag (Allahabad): Its pre-Asokan Origins", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 2, 1983, pp. 253-80. For a contrary view see N.P. Chakravarty, "The Rock-edicts of Asoka and some problems", *Ancient India*, Bulletin of Archaeological Survey of India, no. 4, 1947-48, p. 25; A. Ghosh, "The Pillars of Asoka – Their Purpose", *East and West*, Rome, vol. 17, 1967, pp. 273-75; Irfan Habib and Vivekanand Jha, *Mauryan India, Being vol. 4 of A Peoples History of India*, Tulika, 2004, p. 161.
 5. See John Irwin, "The True Chronology of Asokan Pillars", *Artibus Asiae*, vo. 44, no. 4, 1983, p. 247; For an English rendering of Pillar Edict VII see Irfan Habib and Vivekanand Jha, *Mauryan India, Being vol. 4 of A Peoples History of India*, op.cit., pp. 102-04; see also p. 161.
 6. John Irwin, "The Prayag Bull-Pillar: Another pre-Asokan Monument", *South Asian Archaeology 1979*, op.cit., pp.313-40; idem, "The Ancient Pillar-cult at Prayag (Allahabad): Its pre-Asokan Origins", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, op.cit., pp.253-80.
 7. John Irwin, "The True Chronology of Asokan Pillars", *Artibus Asiae*, op.cit., p. 263; and fig.11.
 8. For example the Allahabad Pillar is 10.7m in length, the Lauriya Nandangarh Pillar, 12.07m, Delhi-Topra Pillar, 12.98m, Sanchi pillar, 12 m, and Kolhua / Basarh, 13.75m.
 9. Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta or Gulshan-I Ibrahimi*, tr. John Briggs as *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power in India*, Calcutta, 1829 (reprint

- 1909), vol. I, p.270.
10. See Meherdad Shokoohi, *Haryana I: The Column of Firuz Shah and Other Islamic Inscriptions from the District of Hisar*, pt. 4, vol. 47 of *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicum*, London, 1988; Meherdad & Natalie Shokoohi, "The City of Turquoise A Preliminary Report on the Town of Hisar-i Firuza", *Environmental Design: Water and Architecture, Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre*, no.2, 1985, pp. 82-89.
 11. Cunningham, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. I, op.cit., p.41.
 12. *Sirat-i Firozshahi*, Ms. Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, facsimile edition, 1999, ff. 91(b) – 105(b). The text of these folios along with an English translation has been published in J.A. Page, *A Memoir on Kotla Firoz Shah*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India 52, Delhi, ASI, 1937. See also Afif, Shams Siraj, *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, Bib. Ind., Calcutta, 1890, pp. 305-14 (Eng. Tr. R.C. Jauhari, *Medieval India in Transition – Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi A First Hand Account*, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 175-80).
 13. *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, p.177.
 14. Afif, op.cit., pp.309-10.
 15. Simal, Indian cotton wood producing fruits full of fluffy and silky whorls of cotton. Technically the plant belongs to Bombacaceae family and species *Bombax ceiba*. Till date the silk cotton from its fruits is stuffed in mattresses, cushions and pillows, besides packing.
 16. The manuscript as it survives is a copy of the original which was made in 1002 AH / 1593-94 AD during the reign of Akbar. The illustrations thus also belong to the same period. However they may be taken to be based on the depictions which might have been there in the original manuscript of the 14th century.
 17. *Sirat-i Firuzshahi*, op.cit., ff. 93a – 95a.
 18. *Ibid.*, ff. 95b – 105b.
 19. *Ibid.*, f. 97b.
 20. *Ibid.*, 103a.
 21. Afif, op.cit., p.313.
 22. Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, vol. II, Bib. Ind., Calcutta, 1873, p. 337; Salih Kamboh, *Amal-I Salih*, vol. III, ed. G. Yazdani, Bib. Ind. Calcutta, 1912, p. 38.
 23. See for example 'The Construction of Agra Fort'. *Akbarnama*, V & A Museum, London, no. IS 2-1896, f.46/117; 'Construction of Fathpur Sikri', *Akbarnama*, V & A Museum, London, no. IS 2-1896, f.91/117.
 24. H. Nickel, The mutual influence of Europe and Asia in the field of arms and armour. – Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour. The Boydell Press, 2002, p.124; See also Paul E. Chevedden, "Artillery in Late Antiquity: Prelude to the Middle Ages", in *The Medieval City under Siege*, ed. by Ivy Corfis and Michael Wolfe., Boydell & Brewer, 1995.
 25. Paul E. Chevedden, Les Eigenbrod, Vernard Foley and Werner Soedel, "The Trebuchet", *Scientific American, Special Issue The Science of War: Weapons*, February, 2002, online issue no.3.
 26. Ali Kufi, *Chachnama*, tr. Mirza Kalich Beg, Commissioner's Press, Karachi, 1900. See also Irfan Habib, *Technology in Medieval India, c.650-1750*, being no. 20 of *The Peoples History of India series*, New Delhi, 2008, p. 88.
 27. Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669 to 1679*, ed. R.C. Temple, Cambridge, 1905. Cf. Irfan Habib, *Technology in*

- Medieval India, c.650-1750*, op.cit., pp. 58, 114-15.
28. P.C. Pant and Vidula Jayaswal, "Ancient Stone Quarries of Chunar: An Appraisal", *Pragdhara, Journal of UP State Archaeological Organization*, no.1, 1990-91, pp. 49-52; see also V. Jayaswal, "From Resource Exploitation to Final Chipping: A Study of Ancient Sculpturing Processes in Chunar-Varanasi Region", *Indian Archaeology Since Independence*, ed. K.M. Shrimali, Delhi, 1996, pp. 35-44.
 29. P.C. Pant and V. Jayaswal, "Ancient Stone Quarries", op.cit., p.50.
 30. V. Jayaswal, "From Resource Exploitation to Final Chipping", op.cit., p. 40.
 31. See Irfan Habib & V Jha, *Mauryan India*, op.cit., p. 124.
 32. Flood misinterprets the text of Shams Siraj Afif to claim that it was Iltutmish who raised the Iron Pillar in the mosque. See Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Transition: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p.248. Afif in the cited quotation simply uses the term *minara* (minaret) rather than *sutûn* (pillar) and thus was referring to the Qutb Minar. See infra.
 33. Lieut. T.S. Burt, "A Description with Drawings of the Ancient Stone Pillar at Allahabad called Bhimsen's Gada", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. III, no.27, March 1834, p.108; the contention that it was also re-erected by Jahangir is supported by the fact that there is an inscription of Raja Birbal of Akbar's court dated 1575. According to Cunningham the position of the inscription is such that it could have been engraved only if the pillar had been lying down. See Cunningham, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. I, op.cit., p.39.
 34. Cunningham, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. I, op.cit., p. 41.
 35. See for example, Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India", *Purusartha, Islam et Société en Asie du Sud*, no. 9, 1986, p.58.
 36. For a detailed discussion and exposition of these theories, see William Jeffrey McKibben, "The Monumental Pillars of Firuz Shah Tughluq", *Ars Orientalis*, no. xxiv, 1994, pp. 105-18; Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Transition: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, op.cit., 247-51; See also idem, "Pillars, Palimpsests, and Princely Practices: Translating the Past in Sultanate Delhi", *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no.43, *Islamic Arts*, Spring 2003, pp.98-105; Anthony Welch & Howard Crane, "The Tughluqs: Master Builders of the Delhi Sultanate", *Muqarnas*, vol. I, 1983, pp. 123-66.
 37. William Jeffrey McKibben, "The Monumental Pillars of Firuz Shah Tughluq", op.cit., p. 113.
 38. Ibn Batuta, *Rehla*, tr. *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, tr. H.R. Gibb, ed. Sir E. Denison Ross & Eileen Power, 1929, (reprint 1983), Routledge? Kegan Paul, London, p.190.
 39. Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656-1668*, tr. A. Constable, ed. V. A. Smith, OUP, London, 1934 (reprint New Delhi, 1983), p. 283.
 40. Catherine B. Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, being vol. I, no. 4 of *The New Cambridge History of India*, CUP, 1995, p. 102.
 41. *Sirat-i Firuzshahi*, op.cit., f. 93a.
 42. Welch & Crane, "Tughluqs: Master Builders of Delhi Sultanate", op.cit., p.133.
 43. Shams Siraj Afif, op.cit., p. 314.
 44. *Sirat*, op.cit., f.92b; See also Afif, op.cit., p.312.
 45. Afif, op.cit., pp. 306-7.
 46. Hultsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol I*, op.cit., pp. xv-xvi, 119; Irwin, "Asokan Pillars: A Re-Assessment of Evidence", op.cit., p. 709.
 47. *Sirat*, op.cit., f.92a.